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CHAPTER ONE

ALICE MEYNELL'S NEGATIVE HAPPINESS:
THE PRIMACY OF EMOTION AND THE NATURE
OF ART

LAURA H. CLARKE

In a review of Alice Meynell's essays, Coventry Patmore declared that her prose challenged conventional views of gender: "At rare intervals the world is startled by the phenomenon of a woman whose qualities of mind and heart seem to demand a revision of its conception of womanhood and as an enlargement of those limitations which it delights in regarding as essentials of her very nature." Meynell, he exclaims, "belongs to a species quite distinct from that of the typical sweet companion of man's life" in that she is a "woman of genius."¹ Patmore contends that "in a very small volume of very short essays...this lady has shown an amount of perceptive reason and ability to discern self-evident things as yet undiscerned a reticence, fullness, and effectiveness of expression, which place her in the very front rank of living writers in prose."² It was Meynell's "masculine force of insight"³ that earned her the undisputed reputation, bestowed upon her by George Meredith, as one of the great "Englishwomen of letters."⁴ Elizabeth Gray observes that Meynell associated herself with male writers "by very consciously lacerating precisely those stylistic qualities culturally perceived

¹ Coventry Patmore, "Mrs. Meynell: Poet and Essayist," *The Fortnightly Review* 52, (December 1892), 761-6, quoted in June Badeni, *The Slender Tree: A Life of Alice Meynell* (Cornwall: Tabb House, 1981), 98.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴ George Meredith, 'Mrs. Meynell's Two Books of Essays,' *The National Review* 27, no. 162 (August 1896), 762-770, quoted in *The Selected Essays of Alice Meynell: Poet and Essayist*, ed. Damian Atkinson (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 60.

(and denigrated) as feminine.”⁵ Angela Leighton also notes that, in “rejecting the conventional badge of femininity and poeticalness,” Meynell “opts, in life, for constant hard work in the world of men and, in her art, for an impersonal, intellectual register which avoids, almost too studiously at times, the secrets of the heart.”⁶ This leads her to exclaim that Meynell’s work “lacks the flesh and blood of passion.”⁷ While it is true that Meynell’s essays are uncompromising in their condensed style and compact expression, I believe that these views of Meynell have missed the fact that unrestrained emotion is at the very heart of her *belles-lettres*.

This chapter will focus on *The Rhythm of Life*—a collection that confirmed Meynell’s reputation as an avant-garde essayist among the lions of *fin de siècle* literary culture—to demonstrate the ways in which the primacy of emotion is central to her theory of life and art. The significance of emotion to Meynell’s foundational epistemology can be found in “By the Railway Side,” an essay that is distinct, both in form and expression, from her other essays. Placed in the middle of *The Rhythm of Life*, the essay presents itself as a fulcrum for the ideas expressed across the collection as a whole. Specifically, the fulcrum is a single moment of emotion on a distraught woman’s face, viewed and communicated to us by a woman of vision, a moment that for Meynell embodies the process of art and imagination. The woman’s emotions testify to the pure, direct, and unfiltered truth of the universe as it manifests in all things in time and space, but this, Meynell believes, is missed by those who do not share her level of insight. Her essay, therefore, reveals itself as a prose poem to declare how only through imagination, and through its representation in art, can the deeper universal resonance of the woman’s feelings be known. Furthermore, re-reading “By the Railway Side” as a prose poem elucidates and enhances what Meynell hoped to achieve in her other essays. Linda H. Peterson observes that *The Rhythm of Life* was written at a time when “the

⁵ F. Elizabeth Gray, “Alice Meynell, Literary Reviewing, and the Cultivation of Scorn,” in Elizabeth Gray, *Women in Journalism at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. F. Elizabeth Gray (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 81. Meynell’s daughter Viola Meynell also attributed the success of Meynell’s essays to her “masculine” style: “My mother had by this time, in 1889, shown that the masculine art of essay-writing was hers by virtue of her mastery of it. Her imagination had taken essay-shape; her terseness and her pedantry made good essay-manner.” *Alice Meynell: A Memoir by Viola Meynell* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons: 1929), 71.

⁶ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 244.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 256.

essay replaced the poem as the prestigious genre.”⁸ Meynell’s essays are indeed artistic statements, and I will demonstrate that unadulterated emotion is central to her concept of the essay as high art.

In “By the Railway Side” Meynell emphasizes the primacy of her perception when she reflects upon what she has seen from the window of a train as it travels on its way through Tuscany. Lindsay Smith observes that the image of the traveler was a popular metaphor for the imagination of the beholder in the nineteenth century, and she explains how for John Ruskin the notion of the traveler-as-perceiver was an important exemplification of his notion of training the eye to see beyond its habitual perception.⁹ The problem of habit is integral to Meynell’s notion of artificiality in the story and to her broader understanding of “decivilised” society, which I return to in due course. As Meynell’s train travels through a crowded station, she is witness to a scene that ruptures her habitual perception of reality. She comes across a scene that she, with her keenly trained eye for the moment, reveals to be a *tableau vivant* comprising one man and two women “in the dress of the shopkeeping class throughout Europe.”¹⁰ They appear for Meynell as frozen amidst the flowing stream of time: the man is shaking his fist at the sky and yelling in frustration about some grievance while one woman is crying at the door of the waiting room and the other, “humpbacked and a dwarf,” hangs on the man’s arm in an attempt to pull him away.¹¹

The whole scene is caught in the artificial web of misconstrued human desires, people who feel deeply but can only express their feelings insensibly through the tools they have been given. The man and women are upset about something, but nobody pays attention or tries to help. The man’s inarticulate gesture leads Meynell to reflect upon the nature of emotion and reality. She asks, “whose ears was it seeking to reach by the violence done to every syllable, and whose feelings would it touch by insincerity?”¹² She observes that “the tones were insincere, but there was passion behind them; and most often passion acts its own true character poorly, and consciously enough to make good judges think it mere counterfeit.”¹³ Here Meynell

⁸ See Linda K. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 185.

⁹ Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 34.

¹⁰ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays* (London and New York: John Lane, 1905), 38. All future quotations come from this edition.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*

expresses her belief that, although there is real truth passion underlying all emotions, our communication of these emotions are typically poor reflections of the passion that informed them.

In reassessing the primacy of emotion for Meynell, and how this is integral to her conception of *belles-lettres*, it is important to recognize the distinction that she makes between two registers of emotion. Emotion for Meynell contains two different processes: one is subjective and bodily, and is therefore empirical, and another is objective and connects the individual to the larger unity, and is therefore transcendental. Bodily emotion partakes of objective emotion, but it takes the artist of vision to apprehend this connection. Indeed, this “counterfeit” state, or mere subjective emotion, is the default for living in the world, as she acknowledges: “It is when I am angry that I pretend to be angry, so as to present the truth in an obvious and intelligible form.”¹⁴ However, such obvious or shallow feeling is not worth remarking because it is not true enough to satisfy Meynell’s discerning requirements for the force of truth in human emotion.

Meynell, as the beholder, is waiting for something that pierces the veil of habit. She sees this in one of the women: “It is of the second woman—O unfortunate creature!—that this record is made—a record.”¹⁵ We learn that this woman “had wept so hard that her face was disfigured. Across her nose was the dark purple that comes with overpowering fear.”¹⁶ Meynell is jolted out of customary perception: “And thus much I think I owe after having looked, from the midst of the negative happiness that is given to so many for a space of years, at some moments of her despair.”¹⁷ What she sees in this woman is pure unadulterated emotion—the forceful truth of her being. Seizing on the inner truth of the tableau, Meynell’s perception expands to embrace the same process that she sees in art. It reminds her of another time when she felt this elemental truth in a painting by Haydon: “Haydon saw it on the face of a woman whose child had just been run over in a London street. I remembered the note in his journal as the woman at Via Reggio, in her intolerable hour, turned her head my way, her sobs lifting it.”¹⁸

Suspended through her vision, the moment of seeing the woman becomes a work of art in itself that impresses itself upon Maynell’s perceptions: “No one had tried to silence the man or to soothe the woman’s horror. But has any one who saw it forgotten her face? To me for the rest of

¹⁴ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

the day it was a sensible rather than a merely mental image.”¹⁹ She feels the woman’s emotions to the very core of her being, and this experience catapults her into a state of heightened perception that remains persistent through the day: “Constantly a red blur rose before my eyes for a background, and against it appeared the dwarf’s head, lifted with sobs, under the provincial black lace veil. And at night what emphasis it gained on the boundaries of sleep!”²⁰ The vision continues even as she listens to the “vulgar” and artificial opera music of Offenbach from the roofless theater: “But the persistent noise did accompany, for me, the persistent vision of those three figures at the Via Reggio in the profound sunshine of the day.”²¹

An experience or vision of pure emotion may be a relatively rare occurrence, but Meynell shows that it can be frozen in art so as to be apprehended again, just as Haydon’s painting accomplished. Meynell, therefore, seeks to capture and universalize this moment at the station by transforming the essay into a prose poem. Unlike her other essays, which tend to articulate rather than to demonstrate her concept of the relationship between emotion and art, Meynell endeavors in “By the Railway Side” to embody her deeper perception in both the form and content of her story so as to viscerally demonstrate how art enhances our ability to perceive the underlying meaning of reality. This is why the story is image laden rather than idea laden. She is painting a picture and giving us a snapshot in a universe of space and time that she has perceived. In rolling the camera for a few frames—within her own experience of the cacophony of languages and sounds amidst a resplendent countryside, at the Via Reggio station in Tuscany “on my way to the Genovesato”²²—Meynell enables us to linger on the interaction between nature and humankind. Although for Meynell there is always a disjunction between humanity and nature, within this artificial scene she deliberately focuses her lens of perception on the woman’s face. The woman is the fulcrum of Meynell’s still life; her face is a work of art because it is able to express the depths of her emotion. Through the power of her emotions she expresses her own uniqueness: “a record without sequel, without consequence; but there is nothing to be done in her regard except so to remember her.”²³ Meynell, as a woman of vision, is able

¹⁹ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 39.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 36.

²³ *Ibid.*, 38.

to consider this anonymous woman as truly unique by focusing on her face as an object of art.²⁴

In another essay in *The Rhythm of Life* called “The Flower,” we see that this idea of unique and inimitable individuality is a key aspect of Meynell’s view of nature, which she opposes to the artificial constructs of human endeavor. She exclaims that “Nature has something even more severe than moderation: she has an innumerable singleness.”²⁵ As a result, “her answer every time is a resembling but new and single gift.”²⁶ For Meynell, every natural thing is inherently unique and beautiful. This quality of nature extends to include humans, and we are aware of our own uniqueness and inherent beauty insofar as we access our deeper emotional selves. The individuality of the woman’s emotions, which allows Meynell to see the woman’s unutterable, essential self, represents a moment that has been frozen in time. But this suspended moment does not exist only for its own sake; for Meynell it partakes of a deeper, universal unity of which pure human emotion is the closest expression. This also explains the significance of the imagery of the sun that opens and closes the story, thematically framing the events within. The train journey begins with the “excesses of the sun”²⁷ and ends with a final reference to the “profound sunshine of the day.”²⁸ For Meynell, light, like emotion, carries the truth of its own individuality and its own universality. Light in its most direct and purest form comes from the sun; just as its light continually attempts to express itself outward over everything in its path, yet continually encounters obstacles—so does emotion continually seek its own expression, yet continually finds itself obscured within artificial structures. Imagination and light are crystallized in the woman’s face as Meynell’s vision gazes upon it, allowing us to feel the inner truth of her feelings. The prose poem, then, becomes an entreaty for genuine communion with those who share her depth of vision and who also seek to express it through art.

Emotion is therefore an integral aspect of Meynell’s foundational epistemology, since its powerful expression marks the moments of our interactions with the larger rhythms and periodicities of nature, or moments when we felt a connection to the deeper structures of existence. Meynell explores this concept of emotion in the title essay of the collection, “The

²⁴ Meynell’s interest in art is reflected in her prolific writings on the subject. See Meaghan Clarke, *Critical Voices Women and Art Criticism in Britain 1880-1905* (London: Routledge, 2005).

²⁵ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

Rhythm of Life.” Reminding us that emotion is not mere subjective feeling, she explains that “happiness is not a matter of events; it depends upon the tides of the mind.”²⁹ The “tides of the mind” is a metaphor for emotion that expresses the cadence of periodicity, and therefore we feel true happiness when we interact with structures or forces larger than ourselves, of which we are a part. In contrast to happiness, we have “negative happiness” (“By the Railway,”³⁰ or another phrase that means the same thing for Meynell is “metrical absence.”³¹ These terms denote the experience of the interval between moments of sight in which we no longer see or feel a connection to natural rhythms and have an experience of the unity of nature. Meynell writes that we must endure these periods of negative happiness and feel secure in the fact that we know with certainty that there will be moments when we will feel connected and empowered again by our perception of the larger unity. Therefore, the poles of our emotional experience of this periodicity are “ecstasy” and “desolation,”³² and Meynell looks to the Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley to emphasize that a feeling for both of these poles comes with the elevated perception of the poetic imagination. “Both souls were in close touch with the spirits of their several worlds, and no deliberate human rules, no infractions of the liberty and law of the universal movement, kept from them the knowledge of recurrences.”³³ Recurrences here refer, like “tides of the mind,” to those moments of connection with something larger than ourselves.

In a similar way to the Romantic poets, Meynell exclaims that Thomas á Kempis was familiar with these recurrences: “In his cell alone with the elements—‘What wouldst thou more than these? For out of these were all things made’—he learned the stay to be found in the depth of the hour of bitterness, and the remembrance that restrains the soul at the coming of the moment of delight, giving it a more conscious welcome, but presaging for it an inexorable flight.”³⁴ The “remembrance” is the deeply felt awareness of this connection, greeted now with mingled joy because of the memory that is has already come and gone before, carrying the same emotion; thus Meynell notes that there is loss inherent in such moments that is just as keenly felt as its joy—speaking, no doubt, of her own perceptions as much as Kempis’.

²⁹ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

Negative happiness, then, accounts for Meynell's famous emphasis on silence. Feminist criticism of Meynell has seen this stance as an exemplification of gendered spaces, but this does not take into account the centrality of emotion to her epistemology.³⁵ In the essay "Remembrance," Meynell further elaborates on the concept of negative happiness, ascribing to it "the discovery which life brings to us - that the negative quality of which Buddhism seems to accuse all good is partaken by our happiness."³⁶ Meynell uses the example of Buddhism, which holds that all things in reality are tinged with imperfection, to describe the feeling that one's emotions are generally obstructed in the world—which is a quality of not feeling entirely satisfied with one's own expression in the world at any given moment—a quality she defines as negative happiness. Thus the respective silences of Kempis and that of her own father, the figure of restraint whom she lauds in "Remembrance," are interpreted by Meynell as acts of waiting out the artificiality of emotions and acts, until one's next vision or perception encounters something real and natural, something worth describing. Silence for Meynell is the absence of artificiality, but it is far from the absence of emotion. Since reality is undergirded by a constantly outflowing force (symbolized by light), even during periods of negative happiness, our capacity for deeper emotion is, though largely unacknowledged, ever present. Vanessa Furse Jackson observes the same relationship between silence and emotion in Meynell's poetry that is central to her essays:

When emotion is present in the poems, as often it is, it may not always be expressed directly; it can lie implicit somewhere behind the thought that itself is being so intelligently expressed, either in the silence of what is not said, or sometimes in the interplay between the blood-pulse of the meter and the breaths that must intrude upon it to create the longer rhythms of phrase.³⁷

Meynell believes we must have insight and strength to abide with our emotions and to not ignore or change them. Since emotions are always traces of a deeper current, Meynell contends that we cannot compel this deeper motion to alter its course. Emotion is the experience of existing, and feeling that you exist, within a framework of existence larger than your own,

³⁵ See Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets*, Talia Schaffer "A Tethered Angel: The Martyrology of Alice Meynell" *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Women Writers 1890-1918 (Spring, 2000): 49-61.

³⁶ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 15.

³⁷ Vanessa Furse Jackson, "'Tides of the Mind': Restraint and Renunciation in the Poetry of Alice Meynell" *Victorian Poetry* vol. 36 no. 4 (Winter, 1998), 452.

and thus it is through emotion in the art of her essays that Meynell strives to bridge human and natural law.

The essays in *The Rhythm of Life* are preoccupied with the dynamic forces of emotion and with the artificial constructs that obscure these emotional forces. For Meynell, it is only by attending to natural law that we can be attuned to our emotions, which are the purest expressions of life. Deriving from the Latin verb *emovere*, to move out, emotions are inextricably linked to the vitality of movement and the processes of the imagination. We see the distinction between vitality and artificiality in the striking essay “Unstable Equilibrium.” Meynell sees the life and energy of the universe in the dynamic movement of the human leg and foot. Organic structures can dynamically respond to the ever-changing nature of reality, whereas artificial structures are static and require adjustment; thus, for Meynell, “a lifeless structure is in stable equilibrium,”³⁸ whereas “the body, springing, poised, upon its fine ankles and narrow feet, never stands without implying and expressing life.”³⁹ Crucially, the vitality of the leg becomes for Meynell a metaphor of the human imagination: “It is the leg that first suggested the phantasy of flight. We imagine wings to the figure that is erect and vital upon the vital and tense legs of man.”⁴⁰ In stark contrast to the body, clothing is a metaphor for Meynell of how humans obscure their natural contours, comprising together a contrived world but divorced from the natural world. In wearing clothes that obfuscate our vital movements, Meynell believes that humans construct an artificial world and therefore do violence to natural rhythms: “for the undistinguished are very important by their numbers. These are they who make the look of the artificial world. They are man generalised; as units they inevitably lack something of interest.”⁴¹ Collectively, people do not express the essential individuality of nature and as a result they do not find accord with their own emotions. Thus Meynell contends that people contribute to their own degeneration.

Meynell observes that women’s clothing is still able to imply or hint at natural beauty, and thus can connect to it through the imagination, due to women’s relative proportions: “in the case of the woman’s figure it is the foot, with its extreme proportional smallness, that gives the precious instability, the spring and balance that are so organic.”⁴² But she also emphasizes that “man should not disguise the strong lines, the strong forms, in those lengths of piping or tubing that are of all garments the most stupid.

³⁸ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴² Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 27.

Inexpressive of what they cover as no kind of concealing drapery could ever be, they are neither implicitly or explicitly good raiment.⁴³ Continuing the metaphor, Meynell exclaims that the “piping and tubing” of trousers can only crudely approximate the natural contours and this obliterates the finer lines and curves of the human leg. Thus for Meynell “it is hardly possible to err by violence in denouncing them.”⁴⁴ Meynell observes that clothing could be a beautiful metaphor for embodying the thoughts of the imagination, yet she contends that modern clothing cannot complete the metaphor due to its lack of vitality. This is because “when a bad writer is praised for ‘clothing his thought,’ it is to modern raiment that one’s nimble fancy flies—fain of completing the beautiful metaphor!”⁴⁵ Modern clothing is not a reflection of natural vigor and grace of form and proportion; therefore, it is not an adequate expression of imagination.

Meynell also contrasts natural and artificial structures in her essay, “The Unit of the World.” Here Meynell observes that the unit of man, as a unit of nature, is made to natural scale or proportion; however, she exclaims that we are entirely oblivious to our own body’s relationship to nature. After having discussed clothes as an example of artificial structures which obscure deeper emotion, she turns in “The Unit of the World” to a philosophical discussion of furniture and architecture. Like clothing, Meynell observes that items of furniture are artificial objects that express a different scale from nature and therefore are only an arbitrary unit of measure. This artificial proportion separates humankind from “the universal harmony – a harmony enriched by discords, but always on one certain scale of notes, which the body makes with the details of the earth.”⁴⁶ Meynell contends that Vitruvius recognized this harmony: he “had in truth discovered the key to size – the unit that is sometimes so obscurely, yet always so absolutely, the measure of what is so great and small among things animate and inanimate.”⁴⁷ It is only this perception of the selfsame proportion of nature and man that allows us to experience a deep emotion connecting us to the deeper periodicities of the universe. Meynell asserts that Emerson must have shared the view that unity is expressed in the proportion of nature and man, otherwise he “would certainly not have felt the soft shock and stimulus of delight to which he confesses himself to be liable at the touch of certain phrases, had not the words in every case

⁴³ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 27.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

enclosed a promise of further truth and of a second pleasure.”⁴⁸ Meynell refers to St Peter’s Cathedral as an example of a real structure that is made to artificial proportions. For Meynell, all the productions of nature are made from the same unit of scale, which necessarily renders all things in proportion to each other; the architects of St. Peter’s “imagined human beings larger than the human beings of experience” and in doing so “they set up a relation of their own.”⁴⁹

Meynell questions why humans would spend their ingenuity on building artificial structures when they have not fully understood and appreciated the natural structures that abound everywhere except within the artificial spaces we have carved for ourselves. This is why she takes issue with Oscar Wilde for feeling more comfortable inside than outside:

He seems to affirm that Nature is less proportionate to man than is architecture; that the house is built and the sofa is made measurable by the unit measure of the body; but that the landscape is set to some other scale. ‘I prefer houses to the open air. In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity, is absolutely the result of indoor life.’⁵⁰

Wilde emphasizes that it is only within the confines of an indoor room that man gets to declare the proper proportions. However, while humans might have fashioned something to reflect the order that they hope is inside, Meynell believes that this is not a natural phenomenon and is therefore not a reflection of our deeper inner being. Thus Meynell criticizes Wilde for seeing beauty in the works of man when she sees beauty in art as wholly derived from Nature: “But what profounder homage is rendered by the multitudinous Nature going about the interests and the business of which he knows so little, and yet throughout confessing him! His eyes have seen her and his ears have heard, but it would never have entered into his heart to conceive her.”⁵¹ The emphasis on the heart here is important because in constructing artificial structures, Meynell says we cut ourselves off from the deeper pleasure that arises from an awareness of our organic connection with nature.⁵²

⁴⁸ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 31.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁰ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

⁵² For a discussion of Meynell and aestheticism, see Beth Newman “Alice Meynell, Walter Pater, and Aestheticist Temporality” *Victorian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 3, Special Issue: Papers and Responses from the Eighth Annual Conference of the North American Victorian Studies Association (Spring 2011): 495-505.

Meynell believes that humans create artificial constructs and are therefore complicit in obscuring the deeper rhythms of nature. This is what she defines as the state of “decivilised” man. In “By the Railway Side” Meynell reveals how art can suspend a perception of emotion out of time, because the artist’s deeper feeling is a true feeling that connected them, in that moment, to the deeper structures or rhythms of nature. Since art is the closest thing that humans can approximate to the periodicity of life, it is only true art, comprised of works that have also been touched by the rhythm of life, that traces our “antenatal history.”⁵³ These works of art are therefore the veins of our lineage and our connection to real emotion. To trace one’s inheritance, or artistic heritage, is to plot points along the periodic motions of life, and to recreate this art it is to plot your own periodicity and that of the universe. This is why Meynell exclaims that “well begotten, well born our fancies must be; they shall also be well derived. We have a voice in decreeing our inheritance, not our inheritance only but our heredity. Our minds trace upwards and follow their ways to the best well-heads of the arts.”⁵⁴ To turn away from the art of the past, our antenatal history, is to lose the opportunity of reconnecting to perceptions of truth that have been immortalized by previous artists. Crucially, to ignore antenatal history is to cut oneself off from the potential of expressing these deeper emotions in art, and for Meynell when people cut themselves off from the deeper motions that inform their emotions, they become decivilized.

A decivilized society, Meynell contends, can only produce trash. Indeed, in order for a work to be false, it must have been preceded by a true expression: “trash, in the fulness of its simplicity and cheapness, is impossible without a beautiful past.”⁵⁵ For Meynell the qualities of true expression in art are: “gaiety, vigour, vitality, the organic quality, purity, simplicity, precision – all these are among the antecedents of trash. It is after them; it is also, alas, because of them. And nothing can be much sadder than a proof of what may possibly be the failure of derivation.”⁵⁶ Meynell knows that trash, and its attendant decivilized society, is not the result of individual intentions, or even individual successes and failures, but the aggregate of a people carrying a shared cultural heritage and apparatus—a heritage and apparatus that has been supplanted physically or temporally from its source. This is the “failure of derivation,” a turning away from antenatal history.

Meynell further believes that seeing our antenatal history is a conscious act. This is why if we deliberately create something new without

⁵³ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 10.

⁵⁴ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

consideration for our antenatal history, we participate in decivilization. She gives an example of this in the defiant newness of American art:

He writes, and recites, poems about ranches and the canyons; they are designed to betray the recklessness of his nature, and to reveal the good that lurks in the lawless ways of the young society. He is there to explain himself, voluble, with a glossary for his own artless slang. But his colonialism is only provincialism very articulate. The new air does but make old decadences seem more stale; the young soil does but set into fresh conditions the ready-made, the uncostly, the refuse feeling of a race decivilizing.⁵⁷

In “The Flower” Meynell writes that newness in nature is different each time: each flower is recognizable as one instance among uncounted flowers, yet also wholly unique in itself. By contrast, newness in art is rarely natural and usually artificial, where what is produced is not a real, natural object but merely a reproduction. This lack of vision leads to “more ballad-concerts, more quaint English, more robustious baritone songs, more piecemeal pictures, more young decoration, more colonial poetry, more young nations with withered traditions.”⁵⁸ In “The Flower” Meynell argues that decadence in design is another visible symptom of a society in a state of decivilization. She sees the proliferation of flowers common to the interior design of a standard drawing room of a nineteenth-century home as an example of vision that has been overrun with artificial reproduction generated through an unexamined desire for newness for its own sake. In cluttering our vision with flowers, Meynell contends that we extrapolate the forms and lines of flowers but fail to approximate the essence of a single one. This is different from nature, which “has something even more severe than moderation: she has an innumerable singleness. Her butter-cup meadows are not prodigal; they show multitude, but not multiplicity, and multiplicity is exactly the disgrace of decoration.”⁵⁹ By contrast she uses the example of Japanese decoration, which focuses on one single branch in blossom and therefore attempts to derive the essence of a natural thing, rather than blindly recasting its artificial structure.

This artificiality is “the persecution of man, the haunting of his trivial visions, and the haunting of his inconsiderable brain.”⁶⁰ These trivial visions also prevent us from feeling true emotion in a work of art. Meynell describes an example of this in the essay “Pathos,” which focuses on the

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵⁸ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

perception of real and artificial emotions in art. In “Pathos” Meynell eviscerates a literary critic for analyzing Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* for real emotion but misses its deeper expressions of truth by focusing on the wrong things. This mistake is apparent for Meynell in the fact that this particular critic finds the most pathos in the minor character of Christopher Sly. She asks, “has it indeed come to this? Have the zeitgeist and the Weltschmerz and the other things compared to which ‘le spleen’ was gay, done so much for us?” She implores further, “is there to be no laughter left in literature free from the preoccupation of a sham real-life?”⁶¹ For Meynell, the spirit of the age has become trammled with artificiality, separated from the deep passion that comes from the well-spring of nature.

Meynell says that it is shallow and superficial to appreciate peripheral characters whose deeper emotions are latent and not fully expressed. The critic does not know how to recognize deeper emotion so he is not looking for it; therefore, he only examines the most appealing of the counterfeit ones. As Meynell remarked in “By the Railway,” real emotion in a decivilized society has to be counterfeit if it is to be expressed at all. We mistake what is true and natural because it is no longer recognizable. Meynell concedes that a character like Christopher Sly or Malvolio might very well elicit pathos in real life: “it may be only too true that the actual world is with pathos delicately edged.”⁶² But she asks, “is not life one thing and is not art another?”⁶³ Indeed, for Meynell art is the only system developed by man that transcends artificiality—the one place where we join back to the rhythms and periodicity in art.

Meynell contends that “Art and Nature are separate, complementary; in relation, not in confusion, with one another.”⁶⁴ Thus, if you focus on a peripheral character, you are treating he or she as if they were real persons rather than recognizing that art represents nature. Meynell explains how the critic has made the error of treating art as a thing, or as a collection of things, whereas they are objects selected and reproduced in their essence to generate or excavate deeper emotion. She asks, “is it not the privilege of literature to make selection and to treat things singly, without the after-thoughts of life, without the troublous completeness of the many-sided world?”⁶⁵ Treating the objects of art as real things, decivilized society does not have “a sense of the separation between Nature and the sentient mirror

⁶¹ Ibid., 45.

⁶² Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 46.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 46-47.

of the mind.”⁶⁶ Unlike Nature, the conscious human perception, “the sentient mirror” of the discerning artist, reflects upon and selects objects from nature and presents them as representatives of the universal, which enables others to share in their process of imagination and to perceive intuitively, in what has been selected, all of the connections between the parts and the whole.

Meynell exclaims that “all this officious cleverness in seeing around the corner, as it were, of a thing presented by literary art in the flat” is but another example of decivilization.⁶⁷ In mistaking the artistic object as real object, these writers apply critical tools—which could otherwise be used productively for revealing true emotion—and believe they can “see around the corner” of one or more of its parts, instead of treating the work as an indivisible whole. They think they are being “clever,” but Meynell accuses them of only producing trivial emotions. As in her prose poem “By the Railway,” Meynell closes “Pathos” with a reference to the inevitability of the laws of nature: “it is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun.”⁶⁸ We are all composed of mud and we all emit light like the sun, and it is only real art that brings us back to the beauty and immediacy of these natural processes and takes us out of our “sham real-life.” Shakespeare, Meynell wants to show us, is an artist who used his imagination to make a selection from nature, “and in that gay, wilful world it is that he gives us—or used to give us, for even the world is obsolete—the pleasure of *oubliance*.”⁶⁹ In this forgetfulness Shakespeare takes us out of the custom of our “trivial visions” to the deeper rhythms of nature.

Meynell, as we can see, is profoundly concerned with emotion, and in *The Rhythm of Life* she asks the question of where to find real emotion in a decivilized society. It is here that Meynell turns to the man of letters. Meynell contends that the man of letters—a title that she also implicitly claims for herself—is the antidote to the artificial structures that are erected by egotism. It is the true man of letters who has the honest vision of the periodicity of deeper structures and who communicates this perception in their essays, and this is why the essay for Meynell attains to the level of true art. Meynell observes that language is a structure that can be artificial or natural, and she believes that true language must be a joint product of nature and man, in which every word is a work of art because it is the expression of human vision in union with natural structures. She further contends that this ideal marriage between man and nature is a potential latent within the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 48.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 47-48. Original emphasis.

English language itself, something that is only recognized by people of vision and is essential to the redeeming art of the authentic man of letters.

In the essay “Composure,” Meynell explains that this union between man and nature is possible because English is a “language of dual derivation”: it provides a “united teaching” that combines two main influences: Teutonic Anglo-Saxon roots, which are associated with earthiness and physicality, and Latinate roots, which are associated with more cerebral abstract concepts. Meynell argues that eighteenth-century style was derived from a Latinate tradition, and thus is typified by “tranquility” and “composure.”⁷⁰ This is held in contrast by Meynell with the quality in the words derived from Anglo-Saxon roots which allow the speaker to express a certain amount of authentic passion, what she defines as: “the stimulated and close emotion, the interior trouble.”⁷¹ However, the notion here of “close emotion” is not to be confused with deep emotion; as Meynell says in “By the Railway Side,” this emotion is only “counterfeit” passion, an expression of an embodied feeling that is too shallow to connect you with the deeper periodicities of emotion. For Meynell the true man of letters combines both aspects of the English language, because in holding this duality in opposition and balance, they transcend the inherent limitations of one limited register which would otherwise degrade quickly into artificiality. Therefore, the interplay between German and Latin influences produces more than either can contribute by themselves. Meynell observes that “the most beautiful and the most sudden of such meetings are of course in Shakespeare.”⁷² It is the union of Teutonism and Latinate words “linking their results so exquisitely in his own practice, that words of the two schools are made to meet each other with a surprise and delight.”⁷³ Thus in harnessing and transcending the duality inherent in the English language, Shakespeare allows us to experience a startling moment of true emotion where we see ourselves as connected to a larger unity of existence.

Meynell celebrates the fact that her own time has moved away from the Latinate expressions of the eighteenth century. She uses Addison as an example of what happens if the “tranquility” and “composure” of Latinate words predominate: “Addison thus gave and took, until he was almost incapable of coming within an arm’s-length of a real or spiritual emotion.”⁷⁴ In his language Addison “removed eternity far from the apprehension of the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 55-56.

⁷¹ Ibid., 55.

⁷² Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 58.

⁷³ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 57.

soul.”⁷⁵ Meynell observes that recent writers have looked to restore the “simplicity and nearness”⁷⁶ of our Teutonic roots, but she notes that in going to the other extreme, “men were too eager to go into the workshop of language.”⁷⁷ In rejecting the influence of Latin, writers become too bound to materiality:

It seemed to be forgotten that a language with all its construction visible is a language little fitted for the more advanced mental processes; that its images are material; and that, on the other hand, a certain spiritualising and subtilising effect of alien derivations is a privilege and an advantage incalculable—that to possess that half of the language within which Latin heredities lurk and Romanesque allusions are at play is to possess the state and security of a dead tongue, without the death.⁷⁸

In the essay “Pocket Vocabularies,” Meynell provides a clue as to how the essay of a man of letters rises to art, and thereby allows us to feel true emotion by giving an example of those writers who obscure emotion and therefore participate in the state of decivilisation. Meynell condemns those writers who now attempt to harness the other pole of the English language, the “energy of his Teutonisms and his avoidance of languid Latin derivatives.”⁷⁹ As a result, she sees writing as oversaturated by bluntness, which is propagated chiefly by our Anglo-Saxon linguistic heritage and is wanting for a greater prevalence of abstract thought. Meynell contends that this choice is made because “the weakling has no confidence in himself to keep him from grasping at words that he fancies hold within them the true passion of the race, ready for the use of his egoism.”⁸⁰ As she explored in “The Unit of the World,” this egoism is the driving force behind the artificial structures that we create and that only serve to obscure deeper emotion.

In contrast to these current writers, the “style” of the true man of letters is precisely the ability to coalesce both the material and abstract aspects of the English language in order to connect the individual to the universal, and to help others to recognize that our subjective and embodied emotions point to the existence of objective emotions—the deeper perception of periodicity which connects us to a greater unity. Meynell observes that “a serviceable substitute for style in literature has been found in such a collection of language ready for use as may be likened to a portable vocabulary. It is

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 58.

⁷⁹ Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*, 40.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 44.

suiting to the manners of the day that has produced salad-dressing in bottles, and many other devices for the saving of processes.”⁸¹ This “portable vocabulary” is equated with artificiality and decivilization. These words “are homespun from the factory, machine-made in uncostly quantities. Obviously, power needs to make use of no such storage. The property of power is to use phrases, whether strange or familiar, as though it created them.”⁸² By opposing power to artificiality, Meynell again broaches our inherent capacity to express deep feeling. Power needs no storage because, unlike artificial forms (such as factory-made objects and bottled salad dressing) that only derive meaning in relation to an abstracted system of meaning, power draws from the source of unity that continually flows outward every second, the most immediate expression of which is emotion.

The violence that people commit against language despite its capacity to express the truth of feeling is defined by Meynell as “deadly doing-down.”⁸³ Such an artificial language can only express artificial feeling. This is where Meynell looks to the style of the true man of letters: “and I read it as declaring that the whole man, the very whole of him, is his style. The literature of a man of letters worthy the name rooted in all his qualities, with little fibres running invisibly into the smallest qualities he has.”⁸⁴ It cannot be found in the writing of the ego that partakes of a dead “pocket vocabulary.” In the essay “Composure” Meynell declares that, “to Letters do we look now for the guidance and direction which the very closeness of the emotion taking us by the heart makes necessary. Shall not the Thing more and more, as we compose ourselves to literature, assume the honour, the hesitation, the leisure, the reconciliation of the Word.”⁸⁵ It is the person of vision, the man of letters, who, in combining exact expression and abstract thought, reveals the deeper periodicities of emotion.

That Meynell felt her own essays paved the way for this revolution in *belles-lettres* is clear from her most transcendental essay in *The Rhythm of Life*, an essay entitled “The Sun.” Contemplating the sun as the primal symbol of unity in the universe, she ponders the possibility that “one might penetrate some way towards a consideration of the vascular organism of a true literary style in which there is a vital relation of otherwise lifeless word with word.”⁸⁶ By considering her collection of essays as a “vascular organism,” Meynell elevates the essay to an art form. Each essay

⁸¹ Ibid., 40.

⁸² Ibid., 42-43.

⁸³ Ibid., 41.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 10.

approximates within itself the duality of man and nature, but as she says in “The Sun,” this duality necessitates a unity that contains all of its parts, comprising both man and nature. Thus Meynell will often pair Anglo-Saxon and Latinate words to express an abstract thought in a highly compressed way so as to better approximate this unity. But it is not only the duality of the individual pairs of words that accomplish this effect; she opens and closes her essays with a paradox that expresses thematic dualities with the same oppositional effect. We also see this across the essays, as they echo each other through recurring words and themes.

Individually and cumulatively, the style of Meynell’s essays creates an effect that allows the reader to experience those lines of connection which surprise and delight us with deep feeling. Her intellectual and highly philosophic essays have been seen as deliberately devoid of emotion, but in fact emotion is central to her foundational epistemology. It is precisely through this “masculine” style that Meynell endeavors to evoke real emotion that transcends our subjective feelings and enables us to recognize their relation to the larger periodicities of the universe. Meynell waited patiently during those times of negative happiness for moments of deep vision, and *The Rhythm of Life*, as a work of art, produced by a true man (or woman) of letters, is constructed around one of those moments—the moment described in “By The Railway.” She then endeavors to instruct and guide the reader in ways of seeing so that they may fully appreciate the deep feeling that was engendered by her vision. In doing so, she elevates her perception out of the sphere of her own emotions, making this moment universally accessible to the reader.

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